



# A Day Above A



Photos courtesy of Imperial War Museum

**(Above) Stretcher bearers carry a wounded man through the mud near Boesinghe during the battle of Pilckem Ridge, Aug. 1, 1917. (Below) Soldiers go “over the top” in The Battle of the Somme in 1916 during World War I.**

**Editor’s Note:**  
*Tuesday, what most Americans recognize as Veterans Day, originally began in 1918 as Armistice Day – a day originally designated to recognize the service of soldiers who fought in World War I. The United Kingdom marks a similar tribute on Remembrance Day, celebrated this Sunday, to reflect upon the sacrifices and contributions of military veterans.*

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**O**n Aug. 6, 1914, thousands of cannon erupted across Europe signaling the beginning of World War I. It was to be “The War to End All Wars.” That’s how the press referred to it, and that’s what the young

men believed as they marched to the fields of France. What initially began as a war of national pride fueled by imperial fervor evolved into a horrific debacle, resulting in what many historians have termed the “human harvest.”

The period 1914-1918, known as The Great War, has been chronicled as the bloodiest conflict in the history of mankind. Why? Take a day trip to France and personally walk the miles of muddy trenches near the Somme River or the tortured landscape called Verdun. Marvel as you glance at the thousands of shell holes or the sun-bleached bones that once belonged to artillery horses. Ponder why, even after 80 years, little if any vegetation grows over these still barren landscapes. Even worse, try to count the unending fields of white crosses that mark the military cemeteries or the thousands of names of young men with no known graves. Then pause to listen to the silence. If you can’t hear any birds sing, it’s not a coincidence.

**W**hat made the Great War so devastatingly unique was how it was fought. After halting a lightning-quick German offensive 50 miles east of Paris, the allies stood their ground and began digging trenches as defensive earthworks. Un-



# All to be Remembered

able to dislodge the entrenched allied forces, the Germans likewise “dug in.” The result: a line of permanent trenches stretching from the Swiss border to the English Channel. They would remain for four long, murderous years.

Battle after battle failed to move either side. In fact, the battle lines never moved more than four miles until the end of the war. For many soldiers, the trenches they were digging proved to be their own graves. And between the trenches was a barren wasteland called “no-man’s land.”

No-man’s land was, in most cases, 300 yards wide. Both sides erected multiple layers of barbed wire with one purpose in mind: to entangle the opposi-

tion during an attack. Machine guns and riflemen then ended the misery of those ensnared with startling efficiency. Artillery from both sides continuously shelled the area,

turning once green fields into scarred, lifeless moonscapes. During the Somme offensive of 1916, the British alone fired more than two-million artillery rounds along a front so narrow that the German lines received roughly twelve shells per square yard. Entire platoons were buried when 2,000-pound shells collapsed trench walls. Some men simply disappeared, direct hits turning their bodies into a red mist. The dead, hastily buried a few yards behind the front line trenches, were violently unearthed and blown to bits, their rotting limbs and torsos thrown into nearby trees, barbed wire or hurtled back into the trenches.

And then there was the mud. Artillery barrages churned the soil so often that the ground became aerated. When it rained, such as during the Battle of Passchendaele, the dirt and clay became a sticky muck, much like quicksand. Men and animals slipped off roads or waded into no-man’s land and simply vanished in pools of mud. Thousands were never seen again. Those who survived endured sleepless weeks, lice infestation, poor food, rain, disease, snipers, rats, and the constant stench of death. Soldiers also cringed at the sound of the dreaded trench whistle which signaled

to go “over the top” to attack the opposing trenches. Many never made it more than ten yards, falling to enemy machine guns.

By late 1918, few if any decisive battles had been fought. Both sides literally bled themselves to death and simply grew weary of war. It was only in 1918 that the allies launched a successful counteroffensive, forcing Germany to sign an armistice effective the 11th hour, Nov. 11, 1918. Overall, the war claimed 900,000 British soldiers, 1.7 million Germans and 1.4 million French. America, which only entered combat in early 1918, lost more than 125,000. Even more shocking, seven million combatants are still unaccounted for.

This Nov. 11th, all would do well to make a pilgrimage to the fields of France. Armistice Day is best felt by the heart, not just muttered as a word. Tears are acceptable as one views the endless white crosses of Flanders or the red-stained soil of Vimy Ridge. Tears are acceptable because they validate the sacrifice and honor the efforts of those silent souls whose spirits mourn with you. Then, just before you leave, close your eyes and embrace that lost generation.

Most of all, remember.

